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The Primary Puzzle – What Difference will N.C. Make?

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Office of University Communications

February 17, 2012

Campaigns, caucuses, smear ads and stump speeches. The Times Square ball that drops on presidential election years might as well be a gauntlet, thrown down before not only the hopeful candidates but before an expectant nation searching for—depending on your brand of fervor—either the best person for the job or the next great Hope.

What's different about 2012, though, is that “the next great Hope” is an incumbent (remember the Obama “Hope” posters?) whose path toward another term is strewn not with palm branches as in 2008 but with four years' mixed reviews. But the Republicans determined to oust him can't seem to agree on doing much else—at least not yet. “Waiting for the conservative base is the campaign-trail version of *Waiting for Godot*,” mused columnist David von Drehle in a recent issue of TIME Magazine. “Confusing plot, but audiences still find it gripping.”

Some commentators, like von Drehle, point to a “conservative identity crisis” in 2012, noting the vast differences between small-government libertarians and nation-building neocons, socially conservative “values voters,” fiscal conservatives and Tea Partiers. Others, like the National Review's Rich Lowry (“This isn't a crisis; it's a primary”) maintain that the conservative movement is as unified and dynamic as ever.

Still, after nine primaries and caucuses, no Republican candidate has managed to claim “front-runner” status, making the discussion leading up to the “Super Tuesday” primaries on March 6 all the more crucial.

“What we're seeing from the Republican side,” said Dr. Ben Gaskins, a political science professor at Gardner-Webb University, “is that every time it appears inevitable that [Mitt] Romney will be the Republican nominee, a lot of Republicans recoil from that and say, ‘But at times he's very moderate on social and fiscal issues. Is this really the person we want to be the standard-bearer for the Republican party in 2012?’”

Gaskins argues that Romney has a “Presidential aura” that appeals to Republicans' desire to beat President Obama. The fact that the struggling economy is the most crucial substantive issue also “plays to Romney's advantage,” said Gaskins, thanks to his background with Bain Capital.

Then there's Rick Santorum, whose appeal, Gaskins said, lies in "this notion of his being a strong, non-changing conservative." After a surprising victory in Iowa and an early February surge, Santorum's values-centered campaign has posed the strongest challenge thus far to Romney's well-financed, fiscally-focused program.

But this is by no means a two-person race. The remaining viability of both the Newt Gingrich and, to a lesser extent, the Ron Paul campaigns (though Paul battled Romney to a close second as recently as Feb. 11 in Maine) demonstrates the extent of the conservative base's reluctance to embrace the more moderate Romney.

"Conservatives look at Newt Gingrich, and believe he has their policy beliefs at heart, but he brings a share of baggage with him. Then they see someone like Ron Paul, who has the hearts and minds of a strong and growing minority of the Republican voters, but yet has not been able to expand that base to the extent that Republicans, and especially the GOP establishment, feel that he can be electable in November," Gaskins explained.

It seems conservatives are struggling not only to choose a standard-bearer, but to emerge from this "identity crisis" with a new standard. Perhaps Election 2012 could set the course for a twenty-first century, post-Reagan conservative ethos.

On the other hand, the Super PAC-backed candidates could just as easily bruise and batter one another to the point that beating Obama, let alone establishing conservative solidarity, will be impossible.

Gaskins admits that both are possibilities. "By and large, I think Republicans will come together to support the nominee," he said. "The question is whether or not people in the middle will be so disgusted" by the bitterness of the primary battle "that they will either choose to support Obama or stay home in November." The tone of that eventual presidential debate, Gaston predicts, will be determined by issues the state of the economy in late fall, the progress of democratic revolutions in the Middle East, the Israeli-Iranian tensions over nuclear firepower, and sentiment over domestic life issues like healthcare, to name a few.

But first, a challenger has to be chosen, and Gaskins says the North Carolina primary is likely to play a more decisive role than usual in determining the Republican nominee.

"Most years, clear front-runners have emerged by the time the North Carolina primary rolls around, and our decision is already made," Gaskins said. But with all the uncertainty on the Republican side in 2012, "it's very unlikely that the nomination will be in any way wrapped up" when North Carolinians hit the polls. "North Carolinians will either play a huge role in putting the front-runner over the edge, or in dragging out the contest even further."

The question, according to Gaskins, is, "What do you want your vote to accomplish?" And in 2012, that may be more than just a rhetorical question.



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